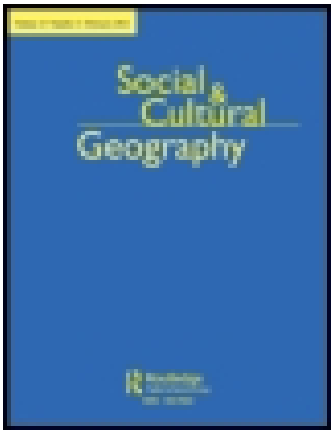

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People, plants and performance: On actor network theory and the material pleasures of the private garden

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People, plants and performance: on actor network theory and the material pleasures of the private garden

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Actor network theory has received considerable attention within geography. In this paper I suggest that geographers have looked at these ideas in a particular way and that this can be productively complemented by an excursion into the contemporary private garden. Through exploring the ways in which people and plants live together there, some geographical criticisms of a defined actor network theory no longer seem to necessarily apply to a more diffuse set of actor network ideas. Furthermore, these ideas can also provide a productive means of engaging practically with the material presence of things, insofar as this materiality is important in the constitution of human cultural experience.

Key words: actor network, materiality, garden, plant, performance.

Introduction

In the inaugural issue of this journal, Peter Jackson (2000) laid down a challenge to geographers. He suggested that a long-lasting concern within cultural geography for the representational and textual aspects of life had, for too long, precluded a more thorough consideration of the material nature of the objects with which we live. Whilst geographers had been attending to the ways in which things may be symbolically represented and talked about, what we had not been doing was paying attention to the ways in which they were practically lived with. Crucially, however, what he also suggested was that we should not necessarily focus on materiality as a specific category from the outset. His call was not for a wholesale shift of focus to a new, novel area of concern, but rather to be attentive to the times 'where and when materiality makes a difference, rather than assuming this in any a priori manner' (Jackson 2000: 13).

In this paper, I aim to demonstrate one way in which we can attend to how materiality can both matter and also not matter. I do this through taking these concerns to a place where the struggle between lively materiality and its symbolic denial is played out not just in academic manoeuvres, but also in routine everyday interactions. Everyday interactions like those within the gardens of north London. The approach that I take draws heavily on the actor network school, the tenets of which are now

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fairly well understood within geography. Indeed, geographers have come to levy a number of criticisms at this framework and my argument here is also that we might want to reconsider these criticisms. In so doing, I hope to develop a way of dealing with materiality that is attentive to its variable importance in constituting our experience of the places through which we live our lives.

On actor network theory

Actor network theory is not a theory. At least, that is what some main exponents have started to suggest (Latour 1999; Law 1999). If it were a theory, it would provide a fixed way of approaching the world, which would be little better than the reductionist models it sought to replace. Rather it is a general attitude and an attempt to be sensitive to the multitudes of circulating forces that surround us, affecting both each other and ourselves (Latour 1999). It is a way of keeping in mind a range of insights whilst also being ever wary that, if these insights were to solidify into a more defined theory, we would begin denying our own negotiation with the complexity of the world. Under actor network theory, people, objects, plants, animals and ideas all jostle against each other, and it is through these interactions that society takes shape and our understandings of this society find form. We should therefore recognize that academic theories are also the unstable outcome of such activities. This theory then leads us to produce a 'modest sociology' (Law 1994), always aware of the partial nature of the way it orders and organizes reality. Exponents of the actor network approach increasingly position their work as a deliberately amorphous set of studies that resist absolute evaluation. On a more mundane level, it is certainly true that the actor network school has been vigorously evolving and questioning its own tenets over the last fifteen years. Indeed, Law (1997) questions the extent to which the theory, first advocated in Paris in the 1980s, is akin to the theory later used at Lancaster in the 1990s. There are commonalties certainly, but there are also differences, as particular aspects have been refined and developed.

In this context it becomes particularly important to consider how such a floating resource has been drawn upon. The criticisms that we might have thought to belong to a fixed theory might no longer be of relevance to a diffuse school of thought. It is with this in mind that I want to now sketch a picture of geographical engagement with this thought. Having done this, I will then elaborate on my own particular engagement with some actor network ideas. This leads me finally to conclude that some of the criticisms made of the actor network approach might stem as much from its uptake as from its essence. My aim here, therefore, is explicitly not to take an evaluative stance on a defined actor network theory. Rather it is to question the ways in which this approach has been assessed in geographical research and debate through counterpoising some of my own work within the domestic garden.

A sketch of geographical engagement with actor network thought

Characteristically, geographers have been eager to consider the spatial applications of the actor network approach, though this engagement has taken different forms. Murdoch (1998), for instance, suggests actor network thought be connected to a 'relational' concept of space that considers space as an 'effect': only meaningful in terms of the orderings and conceptions from

which it emerges. Space here is not absolute. It merits consideration only in terms of how actors within this space consider and construct it. He therefore suggests that actor network thought is akin to a prevailing approach in human geography where concepts of absolute distance have been supplanted by more culturally nuanced readings. Laurier and Philo (1999), by contrast, draw attention to an opposing tendency within actor network thought. In their discussion of Latour's *Aramis* (1996), they suggest a different concept of implied space. It is now 'machinic' and space becomes almost absolute. The direct connections mapped between actors risk implying a simple, flat geography. Far removed from current approaches to space in human geography, these flat 'imaginaries' now become reminiscent of the positivistic geometries of location that a more humanistic approach superseded.

Such interpretations suggest how criticisms of one element of actor network thought might not necessarily apply to all. What they also allude to, for my purposes here, is a preoccupation with spatiality within geographical interpretations. The implied spatialities of actor network offered a way of plotting new types of association across different scales and empirically this has excited geographers. Some work has used it to rework the grand spatial narrative of wilderness and distant nature (Whatmore and Thorne 1998). Others have considered it in terms of distributions of technology (Hinchliffe 1996), belief (Holloway 2000) and agricultural development (Marsden 2000). Yet others have considered how it recasts spaces of political engagement (Murdoch and Marsden 1995). Regardless then of how much they have been at pains to emphasize them as precarious achievements, geographers have drawn a set of relatively large and cohesive networks.

Within geographical engagement, a particular focus has also been upon the institutional context of action. This is unsurprising for a number of reasons. A first would be the genesis of actor network ideas in science studies. When Latour (1987) and others had depicted the reconfigurations of reality in the laboratory, it might have seemed natural to take their ideas into other similar settings. A second might be the relatively bounded status of the institution, since an institutional context gives a degree of constraint to an approach that could easily empirically drift (Philo and Parr 2000). A third lies in the fact that deliberate network construction is more likely in such contexts. When the continued employment of a person is dependent upon such constructions, the effort they put into them might be more determined. Their job literally depends upon it. Whatever the combination of these factors, it has broadly been the case that actor network thought has been used for empirical studies of human actors in a largely professional capacity. We have examined actors in such capacities as businessmen (O'Neill and Whatmore 2000), politicians (Murdoch and Marsden 1995), film-makers (Davies 2000) and lobbyists (Woods 1998), in addition to the scientists with whom we started.

What I want to suggest here is that geographical research using actor network ideas has made for a distinctive approach both to networks and to the human actors within them. I now discuss my own use of actor network thought within the private garden. This hopefully serves as a counterpoint to past geographical engagements and also suggests a way of thinking about plant materiality.

Context

The study from which this paper is drawn began with the recent popularity of gardening in Britain and the particular ways in which it is promoted.[1] Private gardening is increasingly

positioned as a display of status and not an engagement with the natural world. Televised garden 'makeover' programmes in the UK showcase a range of desirable and stylish items to be placed within the garden as a means of heightening its value, rather than explicitly describing the ways in which we cultivate plants. Within this context, this research sought to explore the degree to which natural forces penetrated the conceptions gardeners have of their gardens. I wanted to explore how the physical properties of plants were received when plants can clearly be difficult to grow.

Some actor network ideas suggested a way. Latour (1993) offers an 'amodern' space in which to move between disciplinary classifications, like the 'nature' that we had previously assigned to the environment and the 'culture' that we had previously assigned to society. Callon (1986) advances the concept of 'symmetry' through which we should agnostically examine all the entities of the world in similar terms, regardless of whether they were previously classified as social, environmental or technical phenomena. Actor network thought is in part a development from a post-structuralist concern for the relationality of meaning within language. Expanding on these ideas, it suggests that the way in which we understand the world is not purely brokered through the cultural activities of talking and writing. Rather our understandings are as much an outcome of the activities of the physical things that surround us as they are a product of the ways in which we wanted to talk about them. In this way, it is akin to the 'material semiotics' of Haraway (1991) within which specific human understandings are determinedly situated within the physical parameters of particular human activities. The actor network approach, therefore, persistently reminds us that the way in which we think about the world is always, to some degree, informed by the capacities and properties of the particular things that surround us in this world.

With such ideas in mind, the study became about how human and non-human actors worked together in the process of creating a garden and how these processes informed the human conceptions of these gardens.[2] From an actor network vantage the garden could be seen as an ephemeral and precarious outcome, whose achievement—both symbolically and materially—is constructed and negotiated through the interaction of different actors. This study orientated itself around the relationships between two specific sets of actors: the people and the plants of the garden. I spent time with a group of eight gardeners that had more than eight years experience of gardening. They were recruited through two horticultural groups in north London.[3] My aim was to explore how these gardeners thought about their plants, as part of a wider study concerning the role of plants in London gardens.

Methodologically, however, the actor network school is far from prescriptive. Latour recommends that we simply 'follow the actors' (1993) and trace their engagements in whatever ways seem relevant to them. He also advocates an indifference to the constraining legacy of particular disciplinary concerns and a creative approach akin to the ethnologist of small-scale, non-Western societies (1993). We should be willing to draw upon a variety of perspectives according to how they are relevant to the actions being witnessed, rather than remain within a defined tradition which is an understandable, but restrictive, product of a post-enlightenment division of academic labour. In this instance, this meant that I was to move between a social research paradigm of human feeling and identity and a natural science concern for plant biology and behaviour.

Such a potential overhaul of method is, of course, no easy endeavour for those of us

'trained as social scientists' (Whatmore 1999: 35). I am trained in interview technique and this is the approach that I adopted, undertaking in-depth interviews twice with each respondent. I did, however, adapt this method is some way. Firstly, through conducting the second interview as a walk around the actual garden site, such that we were constantly reminded of the material presence of the plants in the garden. Secondly, through being determined in my aim of looking at how plant behaviour was dealt with. This was sometimes difficult. Talking about the mundane was not always easy for my respondents. They instinctively seemed to discuss these as inconsequential and had different ideas about the things that would interest a social researcher. Nevertheless, when it became clear I was as interested in the everyday as much as the symbolic, this became easier and conversations flowed freely. Through such means I sought to admit methodologically the 'creative presence of creatures and devices amongst us' (Whatmore 1999: 35).

As I have mentioned, Latour suggests we simply follow the actors within research and trace their motivations and objectives and how these impact upon the other entities around them. This is equally important in analytical reconstruction as it is in empirical enquiry. In my analysis, therefore, I followed them once again. Transcripts were coded and analysed with an eye to foregrounding the material interactions of the garden and how different actors were practically working together. I first followed the people. They were working hard to create the garden they visually desired.

Starting with the people

Entering the garden with Diane, her aspirations immediately came forward:

> We are planning quite a nice patio, it's not quite finished yet though, but that's the type of thing that we need … you see I develop things part by part as I need them … it all develops.

With Diane, as with the gardeners more generally, the garden was something constantly to be planned and developed to present it to its best advantage. Whilst an informal process there was a definite degree of intent to this. Not to concern yourself with the proper arrangement of your garden was to be vulnerable to criticism from other gardeners. The garden was something to be organized and this was to be done according to their different aesthetic ideals. Indeed, to consider what they were doing as an artistic enterprise was to use a metaphor not so far removed from their own conception. An idea of 'composing' the garden emerged throughout my conversations. I asked them specifically about gardening as a creative process. Responses were broadly similar to Peter's:

> One definitely has a vision of the garden that you desire, and you work towards that … it's like imagining a painting and doing it. What you see down there is … a rough version of the image that I have of the garden that I want.

These people were planning and designing their gardens according to their particular tastes and with apparent ease. The garden seemed to be an inert space upon which their aesthetic sensibilities were laid down.

However, whilst they initially downplayed the strategies they adopted in maintaining these aesthetic achievements, these gradually came to the fore. There were a number of specific processes by which they could find themselves successfully planning and designing, and a number of techniques involved. A first was through a diligent and determined interaction with the garden itself. Whilst the garden was conceived as an aesthetic object, this in no way

negated the actual physical labour involved in its creation. Regular monitoring of what was happening in the garden and what 'needed to be done', was commonplace. This was almost a pleasurable activity in itself: it was part of creating the garden 'design'. The perfection of this design seemed almost to obscure the hard physical labour in some cases—it was a means to an end:

> Rose: I find it very difficult to actually sit there. Because you sit there and you think 'now what's that yellow thing in the middle' … And then you suddenly think 'it would be much nicer if I just did such and such' and so you start to just move things round, or cut things off, or …

Another technique came through mobilizing specific gardening knowledges. For the garden to be an inert individual expression, the right materials and the most appropriate plants had to be selected. From this process came the notion of getting 'value' from plants. Value meant that a plant might flower for longer periods or provide the gardener with a desired colour, texture or shape. Value meant an easier means of creating a garden they were visually happy with for longer periods. Flower successions could also be staged so that aesthetic value could be maintained throughout the year. Ground cover would be promoted so the emergence of weeds, and thus weeding, would be minimized. These people also used their knowledge through the use of specific devices that allowed them to control their plants:

> Joy: You see if it gets dry and you just water it … then the next day it's all drunk by all the big trees! But if you have the watering system and you have it on at certain times—it waters enough—and they all grow!

The watering system thus made it easier for Joy to make the garden do what she wanted. Through such techniques and other tools, such as slug pellets, gel crystals and fertilizers, the gardeners were able to organize their plants into their aesthetic compositions, so that the plants simply 'all grow'.

These were the means by which the seemingly effortless design and planning could be carried out and a specific idea of the plants in the garden could take shape. Diane used her knowledge in such a way that specific plants became no more than component parts of her design:

> Otherwise, well, the whole garden is all right. You see, as I said, it has got its bones there and the skeleton, and the spaces that are left …

Plants thus became a passive 'skeleton', providing the structure to this design. From this vantage, they were all treated with a uniform, determined will. These were the means by which an artistic metaphor for gardening flourished and the means that allowed people to discuss the garden as 'a lovely medium to work in' and the act of gardening as 'something like painting'. The garden was something like a docile landscape upon which the creative stories of the gardeners were written (Duncan 1990). The garden was to be easily furnished and organized now and the 'grass carpet' of the garden could be conceptually thought of as akin to the 'woollen carpet' of the house where design and layout is about personal expression and style (Chevalier 1998). However, there was another account of the process to be written. This would suggest that gardeners were not always so determined. This emerged when we talked about individual plants.

Starting with the plants

Whilst the humans of the garden wanted, then,

to have things ordered and organized into attractive docile landscapes, the plants which lived there had some other concerns. They had to persuade the humans to let them stay there, but they also had other needs: light, water, nutrients and a lack of pest attack. They wanted to survive in the garden and different sorts of plants had different ideas about how to do this and to manage the things around them to achieve these ends.

Conifers, cordylines and *Buxus*, for example, adopt a stoical approach. They cut back on their water, light and care requirements and grow in a slow, steady manner. This is what they had been used to in the places they had came from, such as the steep stony slopes that *Pinus mugo* could ably colonize in central Europe (Rushford 1999). Such skills also, to an extent, serve them well here as they made for a particular approach to managing people. These plants would help with their aim of creating an attractive cultural landscape with a minimal degree of effort. They could be planted and then ignored as part of the 'bones' or the 'skeleton' of the garden that made up its structure and the building blocks of a cultural expression. They seemed necessary but they did not elicit much affection from the humans:

> Joan: I will never ever, ever have conifers. Because they are so dull and heavy … in their natural habitat yes, but not in gardens. It's nice to have sort of backbone structural plants that are there all year but … it's also nice to have the fun ones.

There were clearly then some other attributes that would make for a stronger attachment on the part of the garden owner and a plant could make itself fun and desirable through a number of different routes. One means of being 'fun' was associated with the individual aesthetic attractiveness of the plant itself, over and above its contribution to any wider artistic composition. Diane talked about how she simply 'couldn't let her hostas go'—their architectural forms emerging from the earth were simply too attractive. However, this was not simply a question of letting them stay. Despite the ways in which these garden owners were often reluctant to discuss the mundane labour and care they took with their gardens, this involved hard work. Hostas are prone to slug and snail attack. It is essential to protect them from these predators at all stages of growth. When we walked around the garden beds she told me how she 'would get up in the mornings and go around first thing, sometimes even in my nightie to get rid of all the little beggars'. The pleasure of the variegated foliage of the *Hosta fortunei* and the way in which the leaves push through the ground and gradually unfurl before her was enough to enlist Diane into such a daily routine.

A higher risk plant strategy was to take a more lively and opportunistic approach to survival. Some types of clematis, for example, take a more vigorous approach to capitalizing on summer conditions of long days of sunlight and warmth, as a means to achieve flowering. Whilst it would clearly be in their interests to offer up their flowers for aesthetic human consumption in the most attractive way possible, they had other pressing concerns. Concerns like getting as much light as possible in the often walled, overcast gardens of London. This desire would make plants like the *Clematis montana* 'shoot up' these walls to get as much light as possible. For some gardeners this was problematic and they would have to be 'hacked back' annually. Indeed, more generally gardeners are advised to control these wayward and sudden summer spurts to prevent 'a tangle of stems, well above eye level' (Fearnley-Whittingstall 1997). However, this dogged determination could be disarming. My respondents found it comical that they would go out after a

few days and find such summer climbers falling all over themselves in a quest for light. These plants were endearing in the way in which they would make such vigorous bids for sun, over and above the range of large flowers that would hopefully result from such endeavours.

A third could be related to a more studied indifference to the gardener. These gardeners described how, with the passing of time, they knew more and more about plant varieties. This knowledge then made for a certain attraction to the unusual. As such, unusual plants could capitalize upon this and make greater demands upon their human companions.

Jane: There are times when you get tired, and times when my knees feel stiff or whatever, but you know what's coming as a result of it, so it's … there's a sort of anticipation in thinking, well, is it going to come, is it going to grow?

Rose had persevered with a certain type of lily for over two years. The fact that it has defeated her for such a time made for a real will to keep persevering. I was lucky enough to be there at the time in which the lily had finally decided to open up its flowers.

Rose: Oh, but did you see my martagon? Excitement! Excitement! Um I had some martagon lilies in a pot and they never did anything except produce some greenery, and then I said to the lily man at Westminster one day 'I've got these martagon lilies, and they don't flower' and he said 'where have you got them?' and I said in a pot, and he said that that's no good they don't like hot feet, so I put them in … and look! … a flowering martagon lily! … I put it in a little while ago, um, and I thought that it wasn't going to open up for me before I went away … but it's just opened up, and look … isn't it pretty?

Through such means the attributes and techniques of plants would make for differential success in different gardens. It was also the case that, through these different strategies, the gardeners would be drawn into their gardens and the activities that were taking place around them there. The garden was now 'alive', 'another world' in which to escape and spend time with these endearing plant companions. The people that I spoke with would downplay their work in the garden and the differing ways in which they responded to these different plant strategies, but in our garden conversations these came to the fore. The physical proximity reminded the gardener of their particular relationship and individual needs. As Peter puts it:

Peter: Well I suppose it is true. There isn't a leaf that isn't accounted for in this garden (laughs).

However, this accounting was not now a result of the exacting nature of his design intent and its rigorous implementation. Rather, he monitored the welfare of these plants in a way that he likened to pet-keeping.

Peter: I think it's almost like keeping dogs … you know, they are one's familiars.
Russell: Yes?
Peter: Oh yes, definitely. You know one needs to water them and feed them and to protect them from the greenfly and the snails … and, oh yes, its definitely a child-substitute in some ways.

He talked about caring for things as a fundamental human need. Yet what was also the case with the garden was that this was an on-going organic process. Whilst the people I spoke with were certainly determined and hardworking in taking care of these plants, what was also the case was that if a plant did die it would leave an opportunity for another plant to try its luck and live, with their help, in that garden space. What was evident here was how these different

plant 'characters' would gradually draw the person down into their world, and make for an understanding of their concerns and a commitment to their care.

People, plants and performance

In making sense of these two emergent accounts, I began with the actor network approach to the 'relational' status of entities (see Law 1997). The way entities are understood is a product of the relationships in which they are located and these relationships are shifting and an outcome of the agency of the things involved within them. These relationships and, consequently, the status of the entities within them are therefore 'performed'. Performance is not easy, however, and is often contested. Successful performances depend upon denying other performances and, in this way, performance is connected to the idea of enrolment. This captures the way that some entities exert power over others so that their own desired performance can take place. It was through these insights that I came to understand what was happening in the garden.

When I started thinking with the people, what was evident was the power they exhibited in their own performance. They used a variety of means to enrol the plant actors of the garden. They were able to work vigorously in the garden whilst symbolically denying that this was the case. Through such means the garden could become a feat of their own creative expression and these people could perform themselves into the status of a garden designer. This also made for a particular view of the plants themselves. If we think relationally, plants are not necessarily always plants. They have to work to be considered as an actual entity rather than rest on the laurels of actual physical properties and, in this account, they were unsuccessful. Through both strategic and vigorous enrolment, the people that I talked with were able to display their own agency and to deny the plants their individual existence. The plants became no more than passive paint on the gardener's canvas. The plants were there all right but, within these gardeners' symbolic conceptions, their materiality was of a limited concern within a purified garden space.

When I started with the plants a different picture emerged. The plants then displayed their individual liveliness, beauty and unpredictability. The plants performed themselves into existence as discrete entities such that they became almost considered as similar to people. And this was something that the gardeners enjoyed. They enjoyed their enrolment as happy stagehands, not lead actors, waiting for and coaxing out different beautiful plant performances. So it was equally through the active enrolment by plants themselves that the status of the gardener should be understood. The gardener now pictured him- or herself as the contented 'plantsperson' working with a lively and dynamic set of non-human companions. The direct presence of these plants and their needs constructed a person that was committed to their care. Here was a more direct and intimate hybrid mixing within the garden.

What was evident, then, was the shifting locus of power within this single relationship. The status of the garden and the gardener were not fixed. They were constantly shifting between the enroller and the enrolled, the performer and the stagehand. Plants shifted in and out of being. The gardener oscillated between a designer and a plantsperson. Some were more deliberate in the execution of their plans; others were happier to let things take their course. Some became very determined in what they were doing; others found it heartbreaking to kill things off. The ambivalence and unstable power within this relationship was evident in a

conversation with Rose where we talked about two flower shows she had visited. The critical difference was that at one you could buy things and at the other it was a series of display gardens:

> Rose: Well, I do still like Chelsea very much, I know it's crowded … but it's such perfection. And Hampton Court is not as perfect and … I know that it may sound stupid, but in way I find the fact that you can buy plants at Hampton Court, a distraction. I am so busy looking at what I can potentially buy that I don't look at the stands properly.

Her appreciation of these different events depended on one part of their organization: the fact that you could buy plants at one show and not another. So it was a small thing that completely influenced the way these gardens were viewed. At Chelsea, Rose would be thinking about artistic expression and how she could potentially enrol her garden to recreate such effects. She was the designer thinking of plants as paint. At Hampton Court, however, the beauty of individual plants came to the fore, together with how they might enrol her. Now she was the plantsperson falling in love with particular specimens. These shifting enactments of power, performance, people and plants are represented in Figure 1. I found myself agreeing with Latour when he suggested that

> Humans and non-humans take on form by redistributing the competencies and performances of the multitudes of actors that they hold onto and that hold onto them. (1996: 225)

The status of both the gardener and the plant was something that was decided collectively as an outcome of their properties and motivations at work in the garden. The place of the garden within their lives sat in a precarious balance where the agency of different sorts of actors was of a variable significance. This was a relational materialism within which these gardeners were unsure of how determinedly to act. They were unsure about the irrigation system, for instance. As I have enumerated, this, from an actor network vantage, was a 'scripting' device to help the gardeners perform the garden more easily into a cultural landscape. However, it was also something they were uneasy about since, once installed, it might make for a diminished human engagement with the living garden and a loss of the particular pleasures that were associated with this.

Discussion

I want to turn now to two criticisms that geographers have made of actor network thought.

The first concerns the way in which the stories that these ideas lead us to write become teleological. Actor network thought has shown us how to map topologies of power (Murdoch 1998) and how particular actors can exert influence over time and space. In order to map these topologies, however, any contestation within the exercise of such power becomes necessarily downplayed. In order to create larger pictures of networks we must sacrifice understanding the particularities of the individual enrolments that constitute their creation. Whilst we have begun to talk of the failure (Hetherington and Law 2000; Latour 1996), as well as the success, of network building, we nevertheless still privilege the attempts of certain actors in their construction (Holloway 2000), rather than address the more passive involved parties. Woods (1998) suggests this constitutes a problematic reductionism in actor network thought. The peculiarities of power-play seem difficult to abstract from our networks.

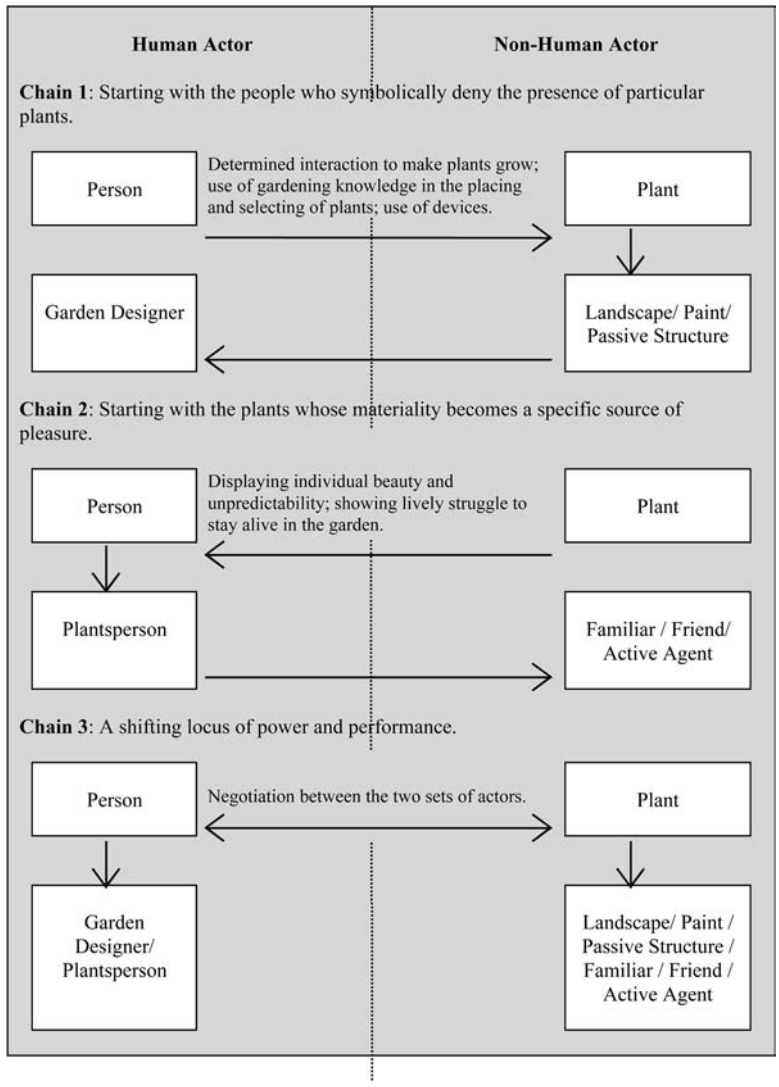

Figure 1 Chains of enrolment in the garden.

The second relates to the portrayal of people. Some suggest that actor network thought implicitly reduces the human self to a calculating, aggressive actor (see Laurier and Philo 1999; Murdoch 1998). In sketching our networks, individual people within them become defined by these networks. Within these they are then seen to operate in a determined and deliberate way. This point is evident in a language of 'strategy', 'engineering' and 'enrolment'. If we are to define human activity in these terms then we implicitly create a particular picture of what being human is about. Geographers have suggested that some of the humanity of humans becomes washed out when we begin to draw upon actor network thought (Laurier and Philo 1999).

What I want to suggest is that these criti-

cisms are as much a product of the particular deployment of actor network ideas as they are of the ideas in themselves. This returns me to the sketch with which I began this paper. The first criticism relates to the spatial nature of geographical engagement. If we focus upon larger networks then we will inevitably overlook the articulations of power within the single links within them and this is what geography has tended to do. The second relates to geography's institutional focus. In such circumstances humans do indeed tend to act in deliberate ways. They are allocated a specific, defined function and a specific job. To talk of strategies and engineering things might be easy within actor network language. However, it is also easy within a professional context.

In my own work, I have used actor network thought to explore the relationship between people and plants. I focused on a single link within a network. I also worked in a leisure setting. Through this exercise I now suggest we can reassess ideas about the pictures of the world that actor network thought produces. Firstly, a shifting locus of power was evident in the garden. Different actors were dominant at different times and within different networks. Actor network thought helped me to grapple with the nuances and ambivalence within this performance of power and by resisting the impulse to follow wider networks these became clearer. Secondly, the humans that I described were as equally non-strategic as strategic. They were happy to be enrolled, as they were happy to enrol. Through looking at people in a non-institutional context, actor network thinking did allow their humanity and their love and enjoyment of their pastime to emerge. By using some actor network ideas in this way I was therefore left with an account that rejected some of the presumed problems of a defined actor network theory.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that ideas from an evolving actor network approach might not necessarily warrant some of the criticisms levied by geographers against a defined actor network theory. These criticisms may stem equally from the way in which these ideas have been applied in geography as from the ideas themselves. Drawing on actor network ideas does not necessarily preclude a close engagement with a shifting balance of power between actors. Nor does it necessarily preclude an engagement with human emotions and subjectivity. Indeed, within some more recent actor network studies (de Laet and Mol 2000; Callon 1999) we can see a movement towards these very sorts of engagements. Within these two particular accounts, both the product designer and the entrepreneur are not necessarily the machiavellian strategists that this approach seemed to deal in. The designer of a water pump might be happy to sit back and watch it evolve in all sorts of unintended ways—so long as they are effective and useful (de Laet and Mol 2000). The businessman only becomes a businessman through the array of things around him constraining him into such a role—he has, of course, emotions and insecurities too (Callon 1999). Actor network theory in its earlier incarnations was necessarily simplistic to make a case for conceptualizing the world as sets of actors within networks (see Hetherington and Law 2000; Law 1997). Other entities were tackled as 'matters to be controlled, limited, mastered' by the people that lived alongside them (Law 1997: 10). The approach has since evolved, however, becoming increasingly nuanced and consequently, as the studies of de Laet and Mol and Callon show, potentially able to deal with the complicated characters of humans.

For my purposes, I hope to continue using

these insights to trace the wider, unstable performances of power that reconfigure the ways in which we understand our gardens. From anthropology, Miller (2001) has suggested that, within a domestic setting material objects can possess us as much as we possess them. The things around us within our homes can take up space we might not necessarily have or can lead to personal associations we might not necessarily want to recall. This uneasy negotiation with the entities that surround us, I suggest, is equally evident outside the home. In the garden, plants have their demands and their needs, and the people they live with deal with these in different ways according to their aims, emotions and inclinations. This paper comes from a larger project that explores the changing pleasures that Londoners find in their gardens and the associated material infrastructures that help facilitate them. It examines how people with more money, but less leisure time (Jackson and Marks 1999), reorganize their gardens and how this effects the significance of this particular place within different lives, both human and non-human.

For other geographers, these actor network ideas might be usefully thought about in new contexts that complement those in which they have been used already. One way might be through using them to help us explore the volatile role of materiality in shaping particular place experiences. My argument here is that if we want to attend to the shifting significance of the material and the symbolic in the social world, in the way that Peter Jackson suggested, then the actor network approach might offer a productive way of doing so.

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Notes

1 According to Mintel (1999), in 1998 Britons spent £3 billion on their gardens. This compares to £2.3 billion two years previously. They further calculate that 17.3 million people in Britain now count themselves as 'keen gardeners'. Moving beyond the statistics we can certainly suggest that gardening increasingly holds our attention with the current prevalence of televised gardening makeover programmes.

2 As such, this work could be seen as part of another exciting agenda within geography—that of reworking the nature–culture duality. However, the purpose of this paper is not to specifically discuss these issues. Rather my main argument centres on the human actors that we have come to discuss.

3 Having made contact with two separate horticultural societies in north London (those of Hampstead and Islington), I was sent a list of seven people who were willing to take part in the study. They ranged in age from 35 to 65 and four of the seven were now retired. All but one were women. Thus, it is important to note that my sample was a gendered one and that some geographers would argue that this might strongly determine the meanings that are abstracted from natural experience. This is something that I am aware of in drawing empirical conclusions from my work, but also something that should not necessarily jeopardize the more theoretical point I want to make here.

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Abstract translations

Peuple, plantes et performance: réseaux d'acteurs et plaisirs matériels du jardin privé

Le concept de 'réseaux d'acteurs' a suscité beaucoup d'attention en géographie. Dans cet article, je soutiens que les géographes ont développé une perception étroite de ce concept et que celui-ci peut être enrichi à travers l'étude du jardin privé contemporain. L'analyse de la façon dont les gens et les plantes vivent ensemble dans un tel espace révèle que les critiques géographiques des réseaux d'acteurs ne s'appliquent pas uniquement à un large groupe d'idées diffuses. De plus, ces idées peuvent aussi fournir des formes nouvelles d'engagement pratique avec la présence matérielle des choses, tant et aussi longtemps que cette matérialité demeure à la base de la constitution de l'expérience culturelle humaine.

Mots-clefs: réseaux d'acteurs, matérialité, jardin, plante, performance.

Gente, plantas y actuación: sobre teoría 'actor network' y los placeres materiales del jardín particular

La teoría llamada 'actor network' ha recibido mucha atención en la geografía. En este papel sugiero que los geógrafos han examinado estas ideas de una cierta manera y que éste se puede complementar de modo productivo por una exploración de ideas de 'actor network' en el jardín particular contemporáneo. A través de una exploración de un tipo de relación jardinero, se ve que unos de nuestros críticos de una definida teoría de 'actor network' ya no son relevantes cuando se habla de ideas de 'actor network' más difundidas. Además, sugiero que este enfoque provee una manera productiva de enfrentar prácticamente la presencia material de las cosas en el sentido de que la materialidad es importante en la constitución de vidas humanas diversas.

Palabras claves: actor network, materialidad, jardín, planta, actuación.